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# South African singers' message, music inspire Chicago students

By Michelle S. Keller  
Tribune staff reporter

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The sounds of South African freedom songs filled the auditorium at Kenwood Academy High School Thursday as three former political prisoners shared their stories with students through music.

The performance by the Robben Island Singers--Muntu Nxumalo, Thembinkosi Sithole and Grant Shezi--is part of Chicago Public Schools' recognition of Black History Month. The schools' administrators, including CEO Arne Duncan, attended the event at the South Side magnet school.

The group, which is named for the prison where former South African President Nelson Mandela spent years for his opposition to apartheid, is touring schools throughout Illinois over the next two weeks.

Their visit is being filmed by Groundswell Educational Films and will be turned into a documentary.

After their performance, the singers told students about their fight for liberation in a country that has only recently discarded the veil of systematic segregation.

For many students at the predominantly African-American high school, the performance and the discussion were a unique way to link history and song through the eyes of people who experienced the hardships of apartheid.


"We learned about this stuff in history, but to meet people who actually went through it, it's kind of amazing," said senior Shadee Manuel, 17, who sang with the Robben Island Singers as part of the school's concert choir.

The singers emphasized the importance of being politically aware and fighting against inequality and injustice.

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"This is a very critical age for high school kids," said Sithole, 50. "They are almost at the crossroads of their lives. My message simply is, know your world, know your place in it, and address the concerns in it. You have a responsibility as a young person to look at the situation and do something about it."

Growing up in a black-only township in South Africa, Sithole was struck early on by the stark inequality in his country.

"I didn't understand as a young kid why we were not allowed to swim where the whites were allowed to swim," Sithole said. "Why weren't we allowed to swim where it is beautiful and nice?"

He joined the anti-apartheid movement at age 15. Sithole was eventually arrested and spent a total of nine years imprisoned on Robben Island.

Kenwood Principal Elizabeth Kirby said it was important that the singers shared their history with the students so that the lessons and struggles of the past were not lost on future generations.

"As generations age, they lose their connection to past history," Kirby said. Younger people may not know "what it really means to sacrifice your life."

Student leaders at Kenwood, 5015 S. Blackstone Ave., shared their own stories about challenges in their neighborhoods and how to encourage others to succeed academically.

"I'm not from a prestigious neighborhood," said junior Charles Merrick, 16, who lives in North Lawndale. "I'm from what you would maybe call a bad neighborhood. So these singers were a real inspiration. Their songs signify hope."

Merrick is part of a student-led mentoring group at Kenwood called the Brotherhood, where older high school boys tutor younger students.

"The purpose of your songs," he told the singers, "it embodies everything that our group is about."

Later, the singers discussed how they could take what they had learned at Kenwood home to South Africa. Nxumalo, 49, who is the chairman of his childhood township's education board, said he was inspired by how students had founded clubs to help each other succeed.

"We still have to face some immediate challenges, such as getting clean drinking water and electricity in rural areas," Nxumalo said. "But someday, some of these lessons will help us out."

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mkeller@tribune.com

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